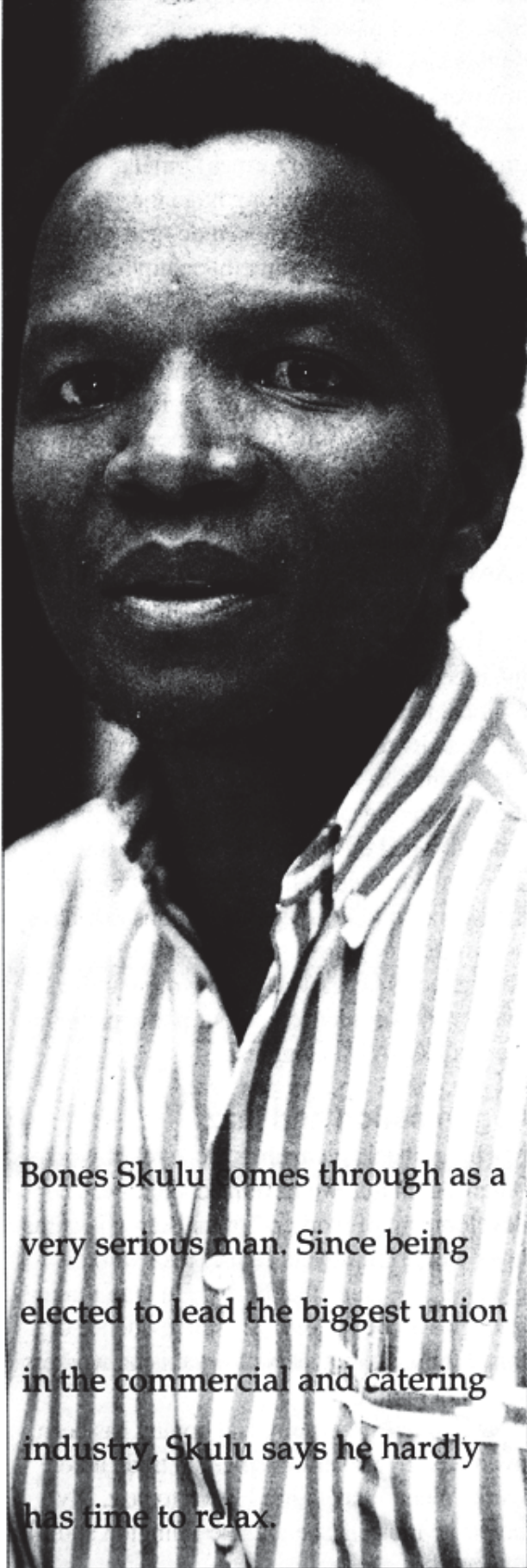


SACCAWU's Bones Skulu

general secretary in the hot seat



Bones Skulu comes through as a very serious man. Since being elected to lead the biggest union in the commercial and catering industry, Skulu says he hardly has time to relax.

I was born in Duncan Village in East London on 23 March 1953. But because of the Group Areas Act, we were removed from Duncan Village and were resettled in Mdantsane in 1968. I am the third eldest of five children. My mother was a domestic worker, and my father a labourer and we also stayed with my grandmother.

My involvement in political activities dates back to 1976 when we marched against the killing of students by police in the Soweto uprising. The march was organised under the auspices of the South African Students Movement (SASM). I was arrested with 41 others on charges of attending a prohibited gathering. We were, however, later acquitted on all charges.

Striking with SAAWU

I completed matric in 1976, and was unemployed in 1977. My first job was at Raylite Batteries as a laboratory assistant in 1978. When the SA Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) started organising in the East London area, we were amongst the first companies to join. I was then elected a shopsteward. We were fired in August 1980, when the entire workforce went on strike demanding the recognition of our union.

After we were fired, I was one of the workers who did voluntary work for SAAWU. This involved organising other workers to join the union, helping out with workers cases and grievances at the office, as well as addressing workers' meetings.

In 1982 I was employed at Grosvenor Ford in East London. The Motor Industry and Component Workers Union (MICWU) had a closed shop agreement, thereby compelling me to become a member. But MICWU later joined forces with other unions in the motor and engineering industries to form NUMSA. I worked at this place until November 1985.

Working underground

At around the same time, I started getting involved in underground activities of the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the ANC. My main areas of responsibility were the building and organising of structures in some Mdantsane zones. I also served in the ANC Border regional executive committee from 1990 to 1992. As Mdantsane fell under the control of the Ciskei homeland, this brought me into conflict with the repressive Sebe regime. They arrested me and was subjected to a four-hour interrogation, after which I was released.

I joined CCAWUSA (forerunner of SACCAWU) in 1985. I was employed in the East London local as an organiser. I was an organiser until 1988 when I was elected regional secretary for the Eastern Cape.

I was elected assistant general secretary of the SA Commercial and Catering Workers Union (SACCAWU) in July 1993. I then became acting general secretary in May this year, after Papi Kganare left the union to join the OFS legislature.

The biggest challenge I faced after taking over from Kganare was co-ordinating the activities of the union during the strikes that happened. There was the ongoing battle between our members and Checkers-Shoprite management, and the much-publicised Pick 'n Pay strike.

When Shoprite took over Checkers in 1992, they cancelled the recognition agreement that SACCAWU had with Checkers, thus leading to strike action. This led to management targeting shopstewards for dismissal because they resisted moves to reverse the gains that the union had won at the chain store. Strikes, including the Pick 'n Pay one, became my major priority of involvement with the aim of giving direction to the militancy of workers. This militancy, in my opinion, is a result of workers' expectations that have been raised by the installation of a new government. Naturally, other office bearers of the union have been part of this process.

Dogged by splits and crises

This has left me little time to do administrative work of the union within normal working hours. I have very little spare time, since I take

work home. I hardly have time to take my wife and two children on outings. When I was still in the eastern Cape, I used to attend other meetings like those of the civic, the ANC, the SACP, etc. I have, however, not been able to do this since I have been in Johannesburg. I just work all the time!

SACCAWU has a big growth potential. The finance sector and the former homelands are areas where we are making huge inroads. Although our union has been dogged by splits and crises, our paid-up membership has grown to about 120 000.

The splinter unions that were formed by some members of our union don't present serious problems. It's true that for a while, say three months, the union experienced problems with those members while we were trying to win them back to the union. But sooner, rather than later, these workers always come back to SACCAWU after realising that their cause is best served by remaining within the union.

The big split of 1987 over the adoption of the Freedom Charter was a battle by one of the political tendencies to gain control of the union. This had its roots in 1985 when Emma Mashinini was forced out of the union, to pave the way for the takeover of the union. But since it has dawned on those who want to cause division from within that they have no support, they see it fit to form splinter unions that have no prospect of growing. As far as I'm concerned, SACCAWU is now more united than ever, as evidenced by our participation at the last COSATU Congress.

Organisation and jazz

My biggest achievement is the level of workers' organisation that we have reached now. The development of workers' organisation is at the level where employers cannot take workers for granted. The gains that have been won through struggles at the factory floor are evidence of this. I think all the years of organising workers were not in vain.

My interest in rugby and boxing has been overtaken by my involvement in trade union work. When I have time I listen to jazz. My favourite musicians are Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. ☆



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